

Infection Prevention and You



Mumps: A vaccine-preventable disease on the rise

What is mumps?

Mumps is a contagious disease caused by a virus. It is spread from person-to-person via direct contact or by droplets of saliva from the mouth, nose, or throat of an infected person, typically when the infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. The virus may also spread if the infected person touches items or surfaces without washing their hands, and then someone touches those contaminated surfaces and then touches their mouth or nose.

Prior to the vaccine development in 1967, over 186,000 people got the mumps every year in the United States. After the introduction of the vaccine there was nearly a 99 percent decrease in cases of mumps. The vaccine is most often combined in the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine. Recently, there have been a number of outbreaks of mumps most often on college campuses.

What are symptoms of mumps?

Mumps primarily affects the salivary glands (glands that produce saliva in the mouth). The main salivary gland is located at the angle of the jaw, just below the ear. During a mumps infection these glands may swell and become painful and tender. Initial symptoms of the mumps are headache, tiredness, and fever, followed within a day by the characteristic swelling of the salivary glands causing puffy cheeks. A small percentage of people with the mumps have no symptoms at all.

To diagnose mumps a swab is taken from inside the patient's cheek; sometimes a blood sample is also taken.

What are complications of mumps?

Mumps is generally a mild childhood disease, most often affecting children between 5 and 9 years old. However, the mumps virus can infect adults as well. When it does, possible complications are more likely to be serious. Complications of mumps can include meningitis (in up to 15 percent of cases), swelling of the testes in men, and deafness. Very rarely, mumps can cause encephalitis and permanent neurological damage. If a woman contracts mumps in her first trimester of pregnancy there is an increased risk of having a miscarriage, however there is no evidence of birth defects in children whose mothers contracted mumps during pregnancy.

Is there a treatment for mumps?

There is no specific treatment for the mumps, but you can keep the patient comfortable with over-the-counter pain medication as directed by the patient's healthcare provider. A hot or cold pack may offer relief: place cool packs on the swollen cheeks (ice cubes in a plastic bag, wrapped in a towel). Some patients may prefer a warm towel on the affected area. Offer non-acidic liquids to drink (avoid orange juice, lemonade) and give soft foods that don't require chewing.

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How can you prevent mumps?

The best way to protect yourself against the mumps is to get vaccinated. Mumps can be prevented with the MMR vaccine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that children receive two doses of the MMR vaccine, starting between 12 and 15 months. The second dose should be given before the child enters kindergarten (between 4 and 6 years of age). The vaccine protects children by preparing their bodies to fight the mumps virus. High vaccination rates in the community should prevent the spread of mumps.

Immunization protects future generations. Vaccines have reduced and, in some cases, eliminated many diseases that killed or severely disabled people just a few generations ago. If we continue vaccinating now, and vaccinating completely, parents in the future may be able to trust that some diseases of today will no longer be around to harm their children in the future.

Additional resources

CDC—Mumps <https://www.cdc.gov/mumps/index.html>

National Foundation for Infectious Diseases—Mumps <http://www.nfid.org/idinfo/mumps>

APIC consumer alert—Measles: What you should know <http://www.apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=measles-what-you-should-know>

APIC consumer alert—Herd immunity <http://www.apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=herd-immunity>

APIC consumer alert—Vaccination saves lives <http://www.apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=vaccination-saves-lives>

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1275 K Street, NW, Suite 1000 • Washington, DC 20005 • www.apic.org/patientsafety



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